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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HARARE 002095

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CHAT WITH A CHIEF

Classified By: Political Officer Win Dayton under Section 1.5(b)(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting with poloff October 8, ZANU-PF MP (appointed by the President) and Deputy Minister of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing Chief Fortune Charumbira identified weaknesses in the nation's municipal administration and outlined efforts to improve them. He stressed the need for the international community to make due allowance for the central political importance of land ownership in its relations with Zimbabwe. The Chief made a predictable pitch for the lifting of USG's individually targeted sanctions (to which he is subject) in order to send a positive signal that could be reciprocated in some unspecified way. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Chief Charumbira explained that he sits on the National Council of Chiefs and is one of 10 chiefs selected by President Mugabe to sit in Parliament. He was elected president by the Council a couple of years ago but declined because of the press of business obligations -- his consultancy work had him tied up with an institutional reform program for the World Bank in Tanzania at that time. Nonetheless, the other chiefs relied heavily on him on a host of issues facing the Council. He noted that chiefs in Zimbabwe historically had a reputation of supporting the government in power -- ZANU-PF now and the Smith regime before it. He said this was generally true, although he considered himself and some others to be independent thinkers.

¶3. (C) Charumbira elaborated on some of his priorities as Deputy Minister of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing. He recognized the potential for political friction between MDC municipal governments and the central government. A key to minimizing these would be collaboration on municipal strategic plan frameworks on which work commenced last March. The concept called for parties to agree on priorities, values, implementation issues in advance so as to promote a depoliticized buy-in from relevant players before opportunities for finger-pointing emerged. Municipalities were now submitting their strategic plans, which would be circulated for peer review before undergoing further revision and eventual implementation.

¶4. (C) More problematic than potential political friction were poor planning capacity and incompetence among municipal authorities, according to Charumbira. The interaction among peers and with central government in the framework review would help, but under the Urban Council Act responsibility ultimately devolved to the local level. The government had considered legislating performance standards for municipalities, but ultimately concluded such an approach would be anti-democratic and likely unworkable. For the foreseeable future, the central government's posture toward towns would be "hands off, eyes on."

¶5. (C) Charumbira cautioned against assuming that the problems of MDC Harare Mayor Mudzuri would be representative of other MDC mayors. Instead, they were typical of mayors of Harare, regardless of political affiliation. He noted that more than one ZANU-PF mayor of Harare had been fired for malfeasance. Mudzuri was his own worst enemy, Charumbira maintained. His abrasive style alienated even those from his own party and he refused to be reasoned with by the Ministry. Instead of responding to explicit Ministry overtures to address problems face to face, he preferred to take everything to the newspapers. And like many of its ruling party predecessors, Mudzuri's administration showed evidence of corruption that bore investigation.

¶6. (C) The Chief emphasized the importance of the land ownership issue in Zimbabwe, particularly for the institution of chief. Land and soil traditionally have been perceived as central to nearly everything that mattered: rains, luck, prosperity, and authority. The MDC's inadequate appreciation of this was a serious liability with the rural masses; the party's belated and limited conversion to land reform came across as politically opportunistic and disingenuous. The chief acknowledged that land reform was fraught with many unspecified problems that the government would have to address, and urged that the international community recognize domestic political factors constraining GOZ land policies.

¶7. (C) Charumbira complained that USG policy on Zimbabwe was ill-advised and unnecessarily detrimental to bilateral relations. He conceded that the "sanctions" cited by the GOZ

as impeding development did not have a large impact per se, but that they sent an influential message to international investors that adversely affected Zimbabwe's prospects for foreign direct investment. He asserted that USG lifting of sanctions (i.e. travel and financial sanctions against named individuals, including himself) would be an excellent confidence-building measure that could engender a more constructive posture by the GOZ toward the USG and the domestic opposition. We gave him no grounds to expect any such USG move in the absence of major changes in the political landscape here.

18. (C) COMMENT: Charumbira is among ZANU-PF's numerous erudite, well-educated technocrats, apparently comfortable with domestic and international interlocutors alike. Unfortunately reflecting the ruling party's current culture of conformity, though, he is likely to be more chary of frankly sharing the insights of his education and experience with his own party superiors than he is with his Tanzanian clients. The Chief keeps a much lower profile than his immediate superior, Minister Ignatius Chombo, in a ministry that will be potentially instrumental in the opposition's performance in municipal administration. In any event, individuals like Charumbira are a potential springboard for evolution or moderation of ruling party policies given the right changes in environment. We have heard pleas for "good faith" from similarly situated party principals affected by USG sanctions but continue to doubt that adjustment of targeted sanctions would positively influence the ruling party in any way at this time.

SULLIVAN